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SERMONS OF JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE

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THE PEW SYSTEM AND THE FREE-SEAT SYSTEM

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The Disciples' Pulpit.

Under this title there will be published once a month one of James Freeman Clarke's sermons. It is not proposed that the sermon published shall always be of most recent date; but the selection will be left to Dr. Clarke, and, so far as possible, special attention will be paid to the needs of the Post-office Missions.

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GEO. H. ELLIS, *Publisher*,

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The Pew System and the Free-seat System.

"The whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body to the building of itself up in love." EPHESIANS iv. 16.

THE subject of my remarks this morning will be "the advantages and disadvantages of the free-seat method, and that of pews sold or let in churches."

As we have had free seats in this church for forty-six years, it may be thought unnecessary to point out here the advantages and disadvantages of this arrangement. We might all be supposed to know this by experience. But it often happens that customs to which we are habituated do not strike our mind or arrest our attention. We take them for granted, and do not think about them or compare them with different methods. Thus, we in New England did not really understand the nature and peculiar advantages of our own town-meetings till De Tocqueville came and studied them, and explained them to us in his book on "Democracy in the United States." Thus, too, those who have always lived where a rational Christianity prevails, often fail to appreciate its value, and do not learn to prize it aright till they go to live in another community, where a narrower and harder kind of doctrine rules the human mind. Then they find out what a blessing they have enjoyed in a free and rational faith.

It is, therefore, well, even for our own sake, to inquire why

we maintain this system of free seats. And it may be also well to be able to give a reason of its expediency to others.

But, before we can properly pursue this investigation, we must ask the previous question: What is a church for? What is the use of a church? Does it do any good; and, if so, what good?

The first answer to these questions would naturally be that "a church is for public worship."

Public worship, though not instituted by Jesus nor commanded in the New Testament, is yet very important as keeping alive in the whole community the sense of God's presence and of our duties to him. Every Sunday, in every city and town, churches are open, and people unite in a communion of adoration and praise. It is an opening out of time into eternity, out of earthly work into heavenly rest, out of things seen and temporal into those which are unseen and eternal. It would be a great calamity to a nation to have public worship given up. A power which lifts the souls of men to a higher level would be taken away. We owe it not to ourselves merely, but to society, to our children, to coming generations, to maintain public worship. But many intelligent people think nothing of this duty. They never go to church; and, if asked, Why not? reply that they get no good there, that they can get more good by staying at home. Very possibly they learn nothing from the sermon, but they must be benefited by uniting once a week with their fellow-men in one great sympathy of adoration. And do they owe nothing to others? Would they like to have the rest of men follow their example? Do they wish all public worship to cease? Do they desire all churches to be closed, and the Sunday to become a mere day of recreation? This is the direction in which they are using their influence. If they are right in doing only what pleases themselves, and doing nothing to keep the nation a Christian nation, others will be right in imitating them. I am sure that many who now

are non-church goers would do differently if they realized this duty to society.

Then the church is also for public instruction in religious and moral truth. It teaches every week the morality of the New Testament. It holds up to men's minds a high standard of duty. It keeps the life of the great leader of our race before the minds and hearts of men. It does more than courts, police, and laws to restrain evil; for these only forbid outward wrong-doing, while moral teaching goes down into the conscience and heart, which are the sources and springs of conduct. The simple reading of the New Testament every week tends to educate the young to righteousness, and to fix in their minds a law of duty, which rebukes them when they go wrong, and becomes at last an instinct of right-doing. This is one great work which the church does for society.

Again, the church makes a new tie of human sympathy between rich and poor, wise and ignorant, people of various occupations, social relations, tastes, and habits. It is the one great influence to counteract the tendency of our civilization towards a separation into classes, cliques, and social strata. Elsewhere men unite for special and exclusive objects in political parties, philanthropic organizations, clubs, and small social circles. Only in the church do all sorts and conditions of men meet together on the broad platform of humanity. Here are all who worship the same God, follow the same Saviour, are taught out of the same Bible, and meet in the same experiences, as tried, tempted, sinful, penitent; as moved by the same truth, going the same way through life towards the eternal world. This communion of soul is an actual addition to the sympathies of mankind. It makes us members of one body. Therefore, Jesus called it a new commandment. Everywhere else we are divided into sections and strata: in the great church of Christ, we become one,—as he foretold, "I in them, they in me, that they may be perfectly *one*."

Lastly, the church is essentially *missionary.* Its duty is to preach the gospel to every creature,— to go out into the highways and byways to seek for those who are without God or hope in the world, and bring them into their Father's house; to leave the ninety-and-nine good people, who need no repentance, and go after the one lost sheep till it be found. The church which is not in some way a missionary church will be stricken with moral paralysis. It must obey the law, "Give, and it shall be given you." It must give its truth to others, in order to feel the value and the reality of that truth itself. We only deeply realize the worth of truth when we communicate it to others.

If the church is for these objects, let us next consider how they are best met. First, look at the Pew System. What is this method?

In the pew system, a number of persons unite and build or buy a church edifice, and then sell or let the sittings, which thus become private property. No one is expected to enter a pew but the owner, his family, and friends. The building belongs to the pew-holders, to keep, sell, or tax, according to what they deem best. Certainly, they do not mean to be exclusive. Usually, they would be glad to have outsiders come in. But, as long as it is understood that the pews are private property, outsiders are reluctant to come in. Such a church is a private corporation, and practically is for the private benefit of those who can afford to buy or rent the pews. Under this system, the question of going to one or another church depends largely, not on one's sympathies and religious tastes, not on which church best meets the needs of his mind and heart, but which is most suitable to his income.

This system has, no doubt, its advantages, or it would not continue to exist. It enables families to sit together; not always, however; for a minister told me last week that some of the families belonging to his society, having outgrown the size

of their pews, were obliged to leave at home, every Sunday, some of their household. The pew system is also an easy way of raising money for the necessary expenses. When a church is attractive or the minister popular, the seats are all taken; and it is only necessary to fix the amount of rent, and call for it every quarter. But if the minister, though a useful and good man, is not popular, or if the tide of population drifts away, then pecuniary difficulties arise in a pew church just as in a church with free seats. The pew system works well in a town where the inhabitants all attend public worship. Then every seat is likely to be taken, and all are contented. Such was the case in New England a hundred years ago, when this method was first adopted. At that time, it worked very well; but now there are many indications that we must prepare for a change. The Episcopal Church, with wise foresight, is already doing this. More than half of its churches have adopted the free-seat system. When our own church was established, forty-six years ago, there were two Unitarian churches at the North End, two at the West End, two at the South End, and six near the centre of the city, all maintaining the pew system. Of these, six have ceased to exist; namely, the two at the North End; one at the West End; the one where Mr. Ripley and Mr. Coolidge preached; Brattle Street Church; and Hollis Street Church. This was caused partly because those who could afford to buy pews had moved away to other parts of the city, and partly because the pew-owners erected new and costly buildings for which they could not pay, and which, therefore, had to be sold for whatever they would bring. Thus the fine old Brattle Street Church was sacrificed; and Hollis Street Church has followed, though it was admirably situated to be continued upon the free-seat principle. It was in the heart of the city, and surrounded by a population which perhaps could not afford to buy pews, but could easily have supported public worship by smaller and more numerous voluntary subscriptions. Brattle Street Church

was sacrificed for an expensive and unnecessary tower. Three of these six churches, both buildings and societies, have disappeared altogether, leaving not a wreck behind. In the other three instances, the buildings have been lost; but the societies have been saved from extinction by uniting with other pre-existing societies. Financially, therefore, so far as our churches are concerned, the pew system can hardly be considered as a success. The habits and feelings of the community have so far altered that it is more difficult now than formerly to sell or to rent pews.

And, after all, this system of selling seats in churches is not very old; nor is it the rule, but an exception. Even in New England, till within a hundred years or less, the parishes were supported by a town tax; and every one in the parish could have a free seat. So it was for two hundred years from the first settlement of the country. So it has been in Europe. In Roman Catholic and Protestant countries, the churches are open to all. The mercantile plan is recent and local.

The chief objection to the pew system is that it is unfavorable to the objects for which, as we have seen, a church exists. We can hardly speak of public worship or of public teaching, when only those who are able to buy seats feel that they have a right to go to church. We can hardly reach the unconverted, the indifferent, the great body of non-church-goers, when our pulpits address congregations composed only of those who already care enough for religion to build churches and pay for seats. We can hardly unite all the varieties of human life before God, and make the church the common meeting-place for every form of human experience, when the test of coming together is the ability to pay a larger or smaller amount for a seat. A friend of mine, a clergyman, tells me that old members of his society, strongly attached to it, have been obliged by reverses of fortune to give up their pews and leave the church, and that others who would be glad to come are not

able to meet the expense. Meantime, he says, many pews stand vacant, their proprietors being absent; and yet no one feels at liberty to sit in them. And these empty spaces, he says, produce a chilling effect both on the preacher and the audience, destroying the social character of the meeting. No doubt, a spirit of Christian hospitality in such churches may reduce these evils to a minimum. Some of the pew churches have all the seats free for an afternoon or evening service, and that is a step in the right direction. Still, the tendency is as I have described.

No doubt there are inconveniences also attending the free-seat system. It requires more effort to meet the financial needs. A free church will be less likely to have a very large revenue. The expenses cannot be met by sending bills once a quarter. Voluntary subscriptions cannot be collected as if they were mercantile obligations. A minister cannot turn aside to explain to the new hearers in his congregation that a free church means one in which all are invited to contribute according to their disposition and ability. If this were done, it would introduce more talk about money than is needed on the other plan, and would interfere seriously with the religious tone of the service. Therefore, the success of the method depends on the gradual education of a society to voluntary giving. Our own experience in this church shows that we can depend upon this. People are gradually learning to contribute without waiting to be asked, and to contribute in larger numbers from year to year. This is also the experience of other free churches in this city,— like that of the Church of the Messiah on Florence Street, that in the Tremont Temple, the Church of the Advent, and other Episcopal churches, which are supported by yearly, monthly, or weekly contributions.

The advantages and disadvantages of the free-seat system have already been suggested, and it is not necessary to do more than refer to them. I must, however, speak of my own

satisfaction and happiness during all these years from having been connected with a society thus organized. I am grateful for being permitted to belong to a church which has kept its doors and seats open to all, where the stranger is made to feel at home, where there are no distinctions and no separation,— a church which is not managed by a few pew-owners, but by all the society, both men and women; which has a large nucleus of permanent members, but also a new congregation each Sunday of transient guests; which has contained all shades of political, religious, and social differences, but where all are brothers and sisters, and where there is small chance of inward dissension, since, if any one is dissatisfied, not being anchored by a pew, he can go quietly elsewhere and find a church home which suits him better. Among our most valued members have been those who, favored by circumstances, have had hearts yet larger than their means, like two of our founders, Mr. Samuel Cabot and Mr. Henry B. Rogers. Others whom we love and honor are hard-working people, working for others, and helping to support a parent or educate younger brothers and sisters. Of one such, years ago, her nephew spoke to me after church as "Aunt Mary." Governor Andrew, who was standing near, said to him, "She is closer to us than that,— she is our Sister Mary."

I have said that strangers feel more at home in a church where all the seats are free. I have several times been spoken to by persons living in different parts of the country, who said, "I never attended your church but once, but I somehow felt entirely at home there." *

Let me not be understood as saying that our method is the only true one. There is room and opportunity for churches of

* A visitor from a distance, who asked the usher, "Where shall I sit?" and was told, "Sit anywhere," after returning home, sent some verses, from which I take these lines: —

"Anywhere, you say, a seat?
That's a welcome true and sweet.
Thank you, usher, for the treat,
Anywhere I please, a seat."

both kinds, to suit all tastes and needs. We have received members from the pew churches; and, in return, a number of our members have gone into churches where they could purchase or hire pews. I think, however, there should be churches in all parts of the city with free seats. If the six Unitarian churches which have ceased to exist had been made free, I think they would have been alive to-day; and then we should have had two at the North End, one at the West End, one on Harrison Avenue, one on Hollis Street, and one in Brattle Square. With these and with the six pew-holding churches, and our chapels for the ministry at large, we should have been well equipped to do our work as a denomination in this city.

I have spoken to you to-day of methods and of organization. Methods are important, and ought sometimes to be discussed. But the spirit in a church is infinitely more important. A good spirit in a body will make the poorest method succeed. The absence of such a spirit will make the best method of no value. Where there is a spirit of hospitality in a church, strangers will be welcomed, and all pew doors thrown open to them. Where there is a spirit of reverence, all hearts will be lifted up, whatever the form of worship may be, liturgic or extemporaneous. Where there is a working church, helping the poor, teaching children, interesting young people in religion and morals, the mode of organization will be of minor consequence. Where there is a missionary spirit, a desire to carry truth and love to all who need it, by means of the post-office or other missionary associations, the church itself will grow by means of what it does, and will be a city set on a hill which cannot be hid. It will be a light shining into the darkness of sad and weary human lives to bring wanderers home to God. We must not trust too much in any methods, but always seek for more of the spirit of the Master. Let us enter into his life, let us feed on his great convictions, let us walk in his footsteps; and then the whole body, fitly joined together and compacted by that which

every joint supplieth, will make increase of the body, building itself up in love.

In a church which is open to all, and where, from week to week, those may enter who are not accustomed to worship there, impressions are sometimes made which are not forgotten. Thoughts with which we are familiar may come with unexpected force to those who have lived in a different atmosphere of belief. Once and again have I known instances of this. We can never know what good may come from words uttered in faith, out of conscience, and with good will. A word of kindness, a word of sympathy, may have far-reaching results. Let us prize our opportunities of thus reaching the hearts which may be longing for some pleasant and friendly voice of good will.

"The world is wide, these things are small:
They may be nothing, they may be *all*."

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